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ABSTRACT

Two problem identification surveys conducted to support Extension Community and Resource Development programs in South Carolina's rural Williamsburg County focused on some implications for citizen involvement in public decision making, specifically in rural community development. A 1975 survey of 41 leaders and 1976 citizen survey of 214 rural households showed differences in perception of priority problem areas great enough to warrant inclusion of citizens' surveys as a component in community decision making. Due to differences in survey methodology and time, rankings of specific items were not compared; however, industry and jobs, health care and medical facilities, and recreation were topics of concern on both surveys. To gauge attitudes and behavior relating to public involvement, citizens were asked the extent of their involvement and attitude toward public expenditures. Data indicated a distinction between citizen involvement (few had been directly involved with solving identified problems by serving on committees, as leaders, or by openly supporting public officials) and participation (a somewhat larger proportion would pay additional taxes to have someone else solve problems). Educational programs are needed to clarify functions of citizen participation and appropriateness of various strategies, though periodic problem identification surveys were offered as essential components of citizen participation programs. (RS)

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Perception of Community Problems by Rural Residents and County Leaders: Implications for Citizen Participation*

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by

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Introduction

Whether rural community development is defined as a process, a social movement, a method, or a program (ECOP, 1966:11), there is general agreement that some form of public involvement[1] is one of the essential components. "Sunshine laws" and legislation specifically mandating public involvement as a prerequisite for obtaining Federal funds in many project areas indicate that heightened public awareness and involvement has become a policy goal, particularly at the Federal level.

Achievement of a high degree of involvement as a policy goal appears however to depend less on Federal mandate than local preference. In a critical analysis of the relationship of Federal policy to local practice, Mogulof (1970a: 1970b) found that the character of public involvement is more determined by local factors than by Federal policies. In reference to several programs studied, he found an inverse relationship between the strength of the national policy regarding public involvement and citizen influence on policy making at the local level.

One method by which public involvement in public decision-making has been promoted is the community self-survey. According to the Southern Community Resource Development Committee (1973), community self-surveys or problem identification surveys as a technique for initiating public awareness and involvement in the community problem solving process has gained wide acceptance among community development practitioners. Recently, however, the question of who in the community should be responding to the surveys and thereby determining the priorities for specific programs of ameloriation has been receiving some attention. Clearly, in order for citizen involvement to work, some identifiable segments of the public as well as the leadership structure must be polled as to the relevant and solvable problems. However, the question of how the information is to be "weighted" and then placed in the decision-making structure remains. Prior to defining the process of using problem identification surveys in public decision-making, several questions must be considered. First, are citizens

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[1]Public involvement is a general concept which encompasses such popular terms as: citizen awareness, citizen participation, and citizen involvement.

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able to fully understand and articulate community needs and identify alternative solution; second, do citizens and leaders agree in their assessment of community needs; and third, to what degree should the public be directly involved in the decision-making process under our representative government?

Citizen Articulation of Community Needs

In reference to the first question, the results of state-wide problem identification surveys using mailed questionnaires carried out in North Carolina (Christenson, 1973) and Kentucky (University of Kentucky, 1975) suggest that residents in general are both willing and able to articulate community needs. In administering a problem identification survey among a random sample of rural residents of a low-income rural county, we also found that, given an opportunity, residents readily participate in community decision-making through the identification of community problems. (Lilley, et. al. 1977) Based on these preliminary observations, we will proceed on the assumption that citizens can effectively participate in providing information concerning community problems.

Citizen Versus Leader Assessments

We are aware of only a few studies that have examined empirically the question of whether or not leaders and other citizens agree on their perception of local problems. In several Georgia counties, Nix and associates (Nix and Seerly, 1973; Nix, et. al., 1974) found that positional and reputational leaders tended to rank coordinative needs[2] higher than citizens. Citizens on the other hand tended to rank exchange needs[3] higher than did leaders. Osgood and associates (1977) conducted a telephone survey of randomly-selected households and mailed identical questionnaires to elected officials in a predominately rural county in Pennsylvania. As was the case in Georgia, they found that the leaders were more concerned with coordinative needs and the citizens with exchange needs. Furthermore, they found that the two groups varied significantly in their ranking of the twenty-five specific issues mentioned. The Osgood, et. al. study concluded that the opinions of officials and citizens are not the same and as a consequence, there is a definite need for citizens' surveys in community decision-making. Also, the officials often responded that citizens are not willing to work for the good of their community. In such cases, however, officials could be expected to be less than enthusiastic about efforts to increase public involvement.

Degree of Public Involvement

As indicated earlier, increased public awareness and involvement has become a policy goal at the Federal level. Units of government, agencies, and organizations administering Federally funded programs are being asked to more carefully promote and monitor public involvement in their goal-

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[2]Coordinative needs are defined as needs to improve relationships or improve structural arrangements for better relationship between groups and organizations.

[3]Exchange needs are needs for goods and services in return for labor and taxes.

setting and programmic processes. The promotion of public accountability at state and local levels of government suggests that sentiment is that increased citizen involvement is shared goal at all levels. The reason debate exists on this topic is that, often, there are conflicting expectations concerning the implicit and explicit goals of a public involvement program. The assumptions we are making in approaching the topic is that an increase in the quality and incidence of public involvement in community decision-making will result in improvement in the quality of programs designed to eliminate or ameloriate identified community problems. Furthermore, appropriate educational programs for public officials and the general public will have a positive effect on the quality and incidence of public involvement.

Problem Identification

As part of the research phase of the Title V (Rural Development Act of 1972) project in South Carolina, two problem identification surveys were conducted in rural Williamsburg County. The first, conducted in 1974, involved a purposive sample of forty-one positional and reputational leaders. The second survey was conducted in 1976 and involved a random sample of approximately 215 rural households drawn from the unincorporated areas of the county.[4] In the leaders' survey, the respondents were asked, "What do you think are the most important improvements that should be made to make Williamsburg County a better place to live?" In the case of the rural residents a list of twenty-two problem areas was presented and the respondent was asked to rate each as a serious problem, moderate problem, or not a problem. Table 1 presents the findings from the leaders's survey, indicating the percentage that mentioned each of the specific problems. Table 2 indicates the percentage of rural residents surveyed that rated each suggested problem area as a "serious" or "moderate" problem.

There were differences in the methodology employed in collecting the data from the two groups and the studies were conducted at two different points in time. Consequently, no attempt will be made to compare the rankings of specific problem areas. Instead, some observations of a general nature will be made. First, differences in the opinions of rural residents and the leaders concerning the priority problem areas appear to be of a magnitude to warrant the inclusion of citizens' surveys as a component in the community decision-making process. For example, "adequacy of fire protection," the most frequently mentioned problem among the rural residents was not even mentioned by the leaders. In addition, all of the needs expressed by the leaders can be classified as exchange needs. Based on research discussed earlier, we would have expected the leaders to mention coordinative type needs. With the lack of comparable data we cannot however draw any conclusions concerning the differences in the relative importance of exchange and coordinative needs between the leaders and citizens.

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[4]Methodology and techniques employed in the 1975 survey are fully treated in Jacob, et. al., 1975 and the methodology of the 1976 study is fully described in Lilley, et. al., 1977.

TABLE 1

Results of 1974 Leader Survey: Problem Identification
Frequency of Mention

Problem Area	#
Industry	20
Education	12
Employment, jobs and labor	11
Recreation - facilities and programs	10
Water and sewer systems	2
Housing	7
Improve or increase agricultural production	4
Health care and services	4
Cultural and aesthetic	3
Race relations	3
Tax equalization	3
Business developement	2
Preserve identity of community	2
Living standards	2
Transportation	8
Work incentives, attitudes	2
Community improvement and services	1
Law enforcement	1
Natural resources and the environment-protect and preserve	1

TABLE 2

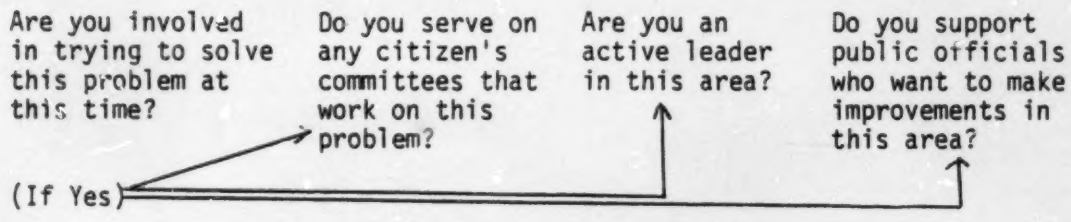
Results of 1976 Citizen Survey: Problem Identification
Frequency of Mention

Problem Area	Moderate or Serious Problem %
Adequacy of fire protection	68.0
Job Opportunities	67.6
Adequacy of medical facilities	55.7
Industrial Development	53.4
Availability of recreational facilities for children	43.0
Availability of adult recreation facilities	39.7
Adequacy of nursing home facilities for older retired persons	38.8
Effectiveness of law enforcement	37.5
Availability of public transportation	35.7
Conditions of streets and roads	34.3
Availability of public housing	33.4
Adequacy of child care facilities	32.9
Adequacy of welfare program	32.4
Willingness of people to work for good of community	29.7
Adequacyof county school system	27.8
Opportunities for participation of people in community activities	26.5
Adequacy of library facilities	22.9
Availability of financing for home building and other needs	22.3
Adequacy of garbage collection and disposal	20.1
Adequacy of sewage disposal	16.9
Adequacy of technical education	11.9
Adequacy of water supply	11.4

Participation and Involvement

In an attempt to obtain information concerning attitudes and behavior relating to public involvement, a series of questions were included in the citizens' survey. After each problem rated "moderate" or "serious," the respondent was asked:

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT


Are you involved in trying to solve this problem at this time?
Do you serve on any citizen's committees that work on this problem?
Are you an active leader in this area?
Do you support public officials who want to make improvements in this area?
(If Yes)

ATTITUDES TOWARD
PUBLIC EXPENDITURES

Would you be willing to pay more taxes to help solve this problem?

The percentage range of all respondents answering yes to each of these questions was:
Involved in solving problem: 0.5 - 5.9%
Serve on committee: 0 - 2.3%
Active Leader: 0 - 2.3%
Support public officials: 0 - 4.1%
Willing to pay more taxes: 4.6 - 30.1%

These data indicate that relatively few respondents have been directly involved with solving the identified problems, either by serving on a committee, serving as a leader, or by openly supporting public officials. Somewhat larger proportions are positively disposed to paying more taxes to solve the problems than are directly involved in solving the problems. The findings are in support of Tankersley's (1976) agrument for distinguishing between citizen participaion and citizen involvement. According to Tankerley, involvement is when the individual or group is physically present and interacting whereas participation is vicarious involvement through a chosen representative. In his words, "Most citizens demanding participation are not demanding involvement . . . . They are demanding that citizens of their choice be involved." (Tankersley, 1976: 4). We interpret the positive attitude toward paying additional taxes to solve the particular problems as an indicator of willingness to participate whereas the other questions tap actual involvement.

The involvement - participation distinction made by Tankerley allows for alternative perspectives in dealing with certain problems in public involvement. For example, a poor response to efforts to promote citizen involvement can be a consequence of lack of interest or concern and/or due

to the fact that a high percentage of the general public feel that their interests are being served or protected by those who are involved.

Summary and Discussion

The research reported here was conducted and results used in a manner to support Extension Community and Resource Development (CRD) programs in the target county. The 1974 survey utilizing positional and reputational leaders provided data for forming Extension CRD Advisory Committees and for developing technical assistance and educational programs in the problem areas most frequently mentioned. It was observed, however, that a high percentage of the leaders interviewed lived in the county seat, quite possibly resulting in an urban bias in the types of problems identified. For that reason, the 1976 survey of households of the unincorporated areas of the county was formulated to provide reliable information to decision-makers and to provide opportunities for rural residents to participate in deciding priority issues.

Based on our observations, industry and jobs, health care and medical facilities, and recreation have proven to be topics of concern of all sectors of the population and this was verified in both surveys. Beyond that, relative importance of issues varied considerably. Research instruments of identical or comparable design would be necessary to compare the rankings of community problems. While a "perfect match" of identified priorities based on citizens surveys on one hand and a survey of community leaders on the other is not likely, should significant discrepancies exist, the need for a more effective exchange between leaders and citizens is clearly established.

Information concerning attitudes toward and actual incidence of participation in community development programs can be particularly beneficial to community leaders when deciding on particular strategies of public involvement to employ. Also, such information can serve as benchmark data for monitoring changes in attitudes and behavior and for evaluating the effectiveness of various participation and involvement strategies.

Participation Training

We agree with Mogulof when he states: "If most Federal policy with regard to citizen participation is erratic and piecemeal, policy with regard to the training of citizen participants is almost non-existent" (1970b: 68). We would, however, go one step further and say that in many cases, the lack of training is perhaps more an attitudinal and perceptual problem among local officials and citizens than an actual lack of opportunities for training. Specially, our observations agree with Mogulof in his statement that when discussing citizen participation, ". . . citizen has become a euphemism for those who are poor, black, and brown" (1970a: 2). This has evolved because minority groups have viewed the stress on citizen participation and the resulting public hearings and other group activities as a means for consolidating a leadership position in the minority community. With this in mind, local officials are often reluctant to increase and expand opportunities for citizen participation beyond what is minimally

required by law, if such participation could ultimately represent a threat to the local officials' own power or relative status in the community.

We suggest that there are various types of Extension educational programs which could lead to the implementation and further development of locally-based citizen participation programs. First, educational programs are needed which clarify the various functions of citizen participation[5] and the appropriates of various participation strategies. Heberlein (1976) presents a list of alternative involvement strategies and discussess the appropriateness of each in terms of the various objectives for involving the general public. A familiarization with these strategies and techniques will allow leaders and citizens to get beyond the point of automatically associating "citizen participation" wih a hastily-organized public meeting. (See Appendix I for an elaboration of Heberlein's ideas) Recent state-level programs in "anticipatory democracy" (summarized in Baker, 1976) have demonstrated that by bringing citizens and leaders together and employing various interactive techniques of involvement, positive attitudes toward public involvement can be developed and reenforced.

Despite some of the criticism of the self-survey resulting from too frequent use or poor design (Jordan, et. al., 1976b; Littrell, n.d.) it is "the only technique, other than talking to every citizen, which is capable of being statistically representative of all citizens" (Jordan, et. al., 1976b: 240). We suggest therefore that periodic - though not too frequent - problem identification surveys are an essential component of citizen participation programs. Dillman (1977) explores alternative unobtrusive techniques for collecting reliable data and suggests ways of using telephone and mail surveys to facilitate the data collection process and eliminate some of the negative reaction associated the time-consuming personal interviews.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of citizen participation programs will depend on the attitudes of political leaders who are charged with the responsibility of deciding how resources will be allocated. If the leaders can convince citizens that their input is welcome and that it will contribute to the solution of social problems, and effective program of participation is likely to evolve. (Office of Exploratory Research and Problem Assessment, 1973: 24) Beyond that, a working knowledge of the various techniques will facilitate and enhance the quality of subsequent participation.

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[5]Alternative functions of citizen participation range from legitimizing an agency's program to the building of neighborhood power groups able to influence policy concerning resource distribution.

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APPENDIX I

Heberlein's Functions and Forms of Public Involvement*

A. Functions of public involvement
   1. Giving and getting information
   2. Interaction with the public
   3. Assuring the public
   4. Ritualism - to meet formal and legal requirements

B. Forms of public involvement
   1. Public meetings - good for giving information but not for receiving
   2. Small group workshops - excellent for all form functions
   3. Presentations to established groups - good for giving information
   4. Ad Hoc committees - good for information exchange and excellent for interaction and assurance
   5. Advisory committees - good for information exchange and excellent for interaction and assurance
   6. Key contacts - excellent for all four functions
   7. Analysis of spontaneous mail response - good for information collection
   8. Solicit information via mail - excellent for giving information and good for assurance
   9. Questionnaires and groups - excellent for getting information
   10. Observing behavior - excellent for getting information
   11. Reports from key staff - good for getting information
   12. News releases and mass media - good for giving information
   13. Analysis of mass media - fair for getting information
   14. Day-to-day public contacts - good for information exchange, excellent for interaction

*From Heberlein (1976:16-23)